Opening Statement

The Honorable Mike Honda (D-CA)

Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Energy

U.S. House Committee on Science

Hearing: Winning Teams and Innovative Technologies from the 2005 Solar Decathlon"

November 2, 2005

Madam Chairwoman, thank you for holding this hearing today on the Solar Decathlon.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here today. It is especially nice to have the students with us. You bring a different perspective to us than our usual witnesses do.

I'm the kind of person who drives a hybrid car and wants to keep the battery charged with a solar cell when I don't drive it for a while.

But as a nation, we have not followed that same line of thinking. The United States was once the leader in solar technologies. The first solar cell that produced a useful amount of electricity was invented here.

But last year, only 11 percent of the photovoltaic generating capacity was manufactured here. And our track record at installing solar generating capacity is equally poor.

By the end of 2004, the United States installed photovoltaic generating capacity was only about equal to what a standard coal-fired power plant produces, or approximately 0.04 percent of U.S. electricity production.

We have fallen behind other nations, such as Germany and Japan, which saw solar installation increase as a result of meaningful incentive programs.

But all is not lost. A quick glance at a solar resource map shows that most of the United States has far greater potential for solar power than Germany, a nation that has succeeded in bringing solar along with the proper incentives.

This means that the United States has tremendous growth potential for solar energy. My own state of California is taking the lead, with over 100 MW of installed grid capacity to date.

It has taken a commitment to get to this point, though, because a typical home photovoltaic system is not cheap to purchase and install. If you do the math to figure out how much the electricity costs, it turns out that it is still higher than the typical retail cost for electricity.

That is why we need Federal and State tax incentives, rebates and loan guarantees to help consumers make the decision to adopt the technology.

To succeed, the cost of solar-produced electricity must be reduced. Fortunately, as more cells are manufactured, the cost for photovoltaic modules has decreased 5-7 percent per year.

As we convince more consumers to make the choice to install these systems, the prices will continue to decline and the cost of power will eventually become comparable to other sources.

But we need to convince them to make that choice. And to do so, we need to show them that solar power can work - even if it isn't a brilliantly sunny day in the desert. So I look forward to hearing about your experiences in this year's Decathlon, which wasn't like that.